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SENSITIVE
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E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: KOSOVO: SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH IN BABIN MOST
VANDALIZED AND ROBBED; MOTIVE UNCLEAR

REF: PRISTINA 614

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED, PROTECT ACCORDINGLY

¶1. (SBU) On August 6, the priest in the ethnic-Serb majority village of Babin Most (Obiliq/Obilic municipality) reported that unknown perpetrators vandalized and robbed his church. He said that several icons were damaged or stolen, along with 800 euros in church funds. On August 6 the Acting Chief Executive Officer of Obiliq visited the church and issued a statement condemning the vandalism. PolOff visited the church on August 8. Parish priest Father Markovic said this is the first time anyone has attacked the church, and added that the stolen icons have no historical or financial value.

¶2. (SBU) Halit Xhemaili, Kosovo Police Service (KPS) chief of the Obiliq investigation unit, told us on August 7 that the investigation is ongoing and there are no suspects. KPS sources said that officers found glass from the broken window on the outside of the church (indicating it might have been broken from the inside), and during a search of the surrounding area found two of the icons that the priest reported stolen.

¶3. (SBU) There have been several recent incidents involving Serbian Orthodox Churches, including the disappearance of crosses and part of the lead roof from the church in Obiliq town and the disappearance of part of the lead roof of St. George Runovic church in Prizren (Reftel). (NOTE: Police recovered the missing lead from the church in Prizren which they say was stolen by youth, and apprehended the thieves who stole the three crosses from the church in Obiliq and located the crosses in Slovenia. END NOTE.)

¶4. (SBU) COMMENT. Reports of vandalism against religious sites are particularly inflammatory; subsequent clarifications of events rarely catch up to the initial claims. Serbian Orthodox Church leaders have repeatedly asked for better security for churches, some of which have been targeted even after they have been partially reconstructed. We will continue to press Kosovo leaders at all levels to respect and protect all houses of worship, and

to prosecute those who commit acts of vandalism, whether out of inter-communal animus, greed, or juvenile delinquency.
END COMMENT.

15. (U) Post clears this message in its entirety for release to Special Envoy Martti Ahtisaari.
KAIDANOW